

Let Me Know by Rellie

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Summary:

Really, out of all the stupid things people believed lately, thinking that Nancy Wheeler had felt sorry enough for Jonathan Byers to have sex with him probably wasn't the most unlikely.

1. Darling You've Got to Let Me Know

Author's Note:

So Stranger Things and this pairing has sucked me in. This was supposed to be a oneshot but me being me, it's really not.

So darling you've got to let me know

Should I stay or should I go?

(Should I Stay or Should I Go- The Clash)

Everyone at school 'knew' Nancy Wheeler had slept with Jonathan Byers.

The same way everyone 'knew' Barb had run away to the city because she'd argued with her parents. Like most people knew her little brother and his friends had befriended a runaway crazy girl who'd eventually been taken back to the nuthouse. Like they knew that some poor vagrant kid had been misidentified as Will Byers because his mother and brother had been so distraught they'd made a mistake.

Really, out of all the stupid things people believed lately, thinking that Nancy Wheeler had felt sorry enough for Jonathan Byers to have sex with him probably wasn't the most unlikely.

But it was the one that seemed like it was going to haunt her the most.

It was a little known fact that nail polish remover could take out permanent marker from wood. If it was all you had to hand and you scrubbed hard enough, angrily enough. The mark would still be there where whoever (*Tommy, Carol, one of their ever changing hangers on*) had dug the pen in hard but it would be faded, difficult to see and easy to ignore.

Unfortunately is was another fact that it wouldn't stop 'Nancy Wheeler is a Whore' reappearing on her assigned desk again by the next time she had English. Sometimes so fresh she could still smell the marker fumes as she sat down.

Metal was easier, the ink didn't sink in. Cleaning 'SLUT' off of her locker only took her five minutes before and after school with some hand-soap and a fresh wodge of paper towels from the girls bathroom. Hardly any time at all in the grand scheme of things. The mean little notes that were slipped to her were screwed up and efficiently binned without reading and the faked coughs, barely masking the insults, were dealt with by developing sudden and *profound* hearing loss every time she stepped out into the hallways without Steve there as a buffer.

Because Steve...Steve was still the golden boy, as hard as he tried not to be. The one people admired, the one people liked without him really trying. And everyone knew he was standing by his lying, cheating slut of a girlfriend and my didn't that make him just a *stand-up* kind of guy?

She wasn't being fair to him, not really. Steve had really worked hard to be everything she'd wanted him to be, he'd been supportive and comforting and.... *there* for her. He'd chosen her over his friends, he'd

made a big point to the whole school- Nancy Wheeler was Steve Harrington's girlfriend and anyone who had a problem with that would have to deal with him. If he knew about the graffiti and the notes and everything... well, he'd find a way to make it stop she was sure of that.

But there was a part of her, a stubborn angry part of her that didn't *want* him to find out. This was *hers* , her penance, her cross to shoulder, whatever.

And after all he didn't ever say anything about missing his asshole friends though she could tell there were times when he did. And in return she didn't say anything about the graffiti and the notes and the hissed hurtful words. Added them to the list of things she simply wouldn't tell him.

Couldn't tell him.

Like she couldn't tell him that sometimes, just for a moment when she woke up, she was so certain she'd just drifted off and had some weird dream. In which a monster had spirited away Barb, her brother had made a friend with magical powers and the government had covered the whole thing up. For a moment, a single wonderful moment, she'd think about how she'd tell Barb about it and about how her best friend would give her that long-suffering but indulgent look she always did when she thought Nancy was being slightly crazy.

Of course that only lasted till she opened her eyes properly. And then, when it all came crashing back down it was almost like losing Barb all over again, every time.

And those were the good nights, the ones when she could sleep. Instead of the ones where she lay, terrified and drifting, suspended in a nightmare world between sleep and waking. A world where once again she was walking through what her brother had called the 'Upside Down'. Only this time she would round a corner and there would be Barb. Pale and cold. Skin like...mushrooms that had been sat in the back of the fridge for too long, until they withered and started to brown and cave in on themselves. If Nancy reached out touched her she just knew her fingers would leave indents in the soft grey of her skin. That if she pushed only a little too hard they'd sink in, the skin breaking away to show the oozing putrefying flesh underneath

"I'm waiting for you Nancy."

The voice was just like Barb, flat and calm, but distant as if she were speaking through a phone with a bad connection. And Nancy would try and force the apology from her lips, feeling it hanging there but choking on her words over and over again.

And then she'd wake up with a start, her bed drenched in rapidly cooling sweat.

Sometimes after those dreams she'd ring Steve, make him come over. Mostly he was happy to, would climb in her window and hold and soothe her without even asking why. He didn't even comment on her newfound habit of always sleeping with the light on. Sometimes they'd have sex but usually she was too exhausted, too frightened. Having him there didn't exactly stop her being afraid but it made it easier somehow.

A few times she'd nearly rung Jonathan. Had tip-toed down the stairs, feet whispering against the deep pile of the carpet and opened up her mom's little flowered address book that sat by the phone. Hovered her finger over the entry marked 'Byers, Joyce (Will's Mother)'. But inevitably she always flipped it shut again, crept back to her room. The Byers only had one phone, in the main room. She would wake up his entire house then have to explain that 'could Jonathan please come over at one in the morning because she had a nightmare'. No. It just...couldn't happen.

Sometimes she thought maybe she should talk to Mike about it but...she couldn't, not just yet. He'd been through enough. Even though he seemed mostly normal again, there were times when she would see him just sitting and staring, a hollow look stealing across his face. And even after everything, they still weren't exactly close. Closer than they had been maybe but not as close as they'd been as kids. A few years ago, she could imagine that they would have been dealing with this together, climbing into each other's beds and whispering about it in the night. But now it was like the boy that sat at the breakfast table with her was still half a stranger.

Maybe that's how it always was with siblings.

Besides talking about it would be too much like...tempting fate. Calling it to her somehow.

That was the horror of it really.

Knowing that *place* was so close. Feeling like anything could easily tip her over into it again.

Compared to that, getting up five minutes earlier to clean the graffiti off of her locker didn't seem that bad.

Today, as she rounded the corner she was already wondering what variation it would be this time. The ones on her locker never seemed to be long, the author obviously knew it was likely they'd be interrupted if they hung around.

Jonathan Byers was standing in front of her locker, scrubbing hard at the metal with a concentrated kind of anger.

"Jonathan?"

He froze, clutching the cloth so tight that ink-dirtied water ran out over his fingers. In front of him, the words 'Cheating Slut' were smudged and smeared but still visible.

"I just... I didn't want you to see..."

"It's been happening every day. I think I would have to have been blind *not* to see it."

"Oh."

The look on his face was wildly guilty. She supposed he probably felt like it was his fault, given his tendency to take responsibility for just about everything. There were smudges of ink on his hands, on his

fingertips. They hadn't talked much since...everything. Not at school at least, just a few snatched conversations here and there when he came to pick up his brother.

He'd used his flannel shirt, she could see that now she was closer, gotten water from the drinking fountain probably. It was ridiculous, it would barely have taken him five seconds more to walk to the bathroom and get paper towels. Now he was going to be walking around in the 'balmy' Indiana winter weather in only a t-shirt.

She unlooped the sweater she'd tied around her waist that morning, holding it out toward him.

"Here, you're going to freeze."

"I can't-- it's yours, I can't--"

"I have a coat, seriously. Take it."

Finally he reached out. She felt his icy cold, damp fingers brush against her skin for a moment and shivered in sympathy.

Her sweater was over-sized, so it fit him pretty well apart from a noticeable tightness across the shoulders. The pale blue looked odd on him though, sort of washed out. So obviously not a color he would pick, so obviously not his sweater that it would probably cause people to talk.

Let them.

“Thanks.”

His voice was soft as usual, something she might have mistaken for him being timid before she'd gotten to know him. Even when he raised it, even when he was shouting, it somehow managed never to gain any kind of harsh edge.

She gave a little half-shake of her head, an almost smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. His answering smile was tentative, barely there really. He'd pulled his backpack on over the borrowed sweater and for some reason it made him look....young. Bizarrely, totally young.

Why did she give a *rat's ass* if people thought Nancy Wheeler had slept with Jonathan Byers. Why was sleeping with Steve Harrington something to be exalted for but the moment people thought she might have let the boy in front of her into her bed she became a whore?

You know why.

The sardonic little voice in her head always sounded a great deal too much like Barb for comfort. But yeah, she knew why. Knew Jonathan Byers was one step away from white trash as far as most of those assholes were concerned. *Weird* poor white trash.

“I don’t care, you know that right?” she said, tilting her head back to look him fully in the face.

He looked confused, hanging onto his backpack strap like he might drown if he let go.

“I don’t care what they think...about us” she elaborated “It doesn’t matter.”

“Right.”

He rubbed at his mouth, like he could somehow pull the right words out with his fingertips. It left a dark smudge of ink on his lip, and she had to forcefully repress the urge to reach up and wipe it away.

“Does *Steve* think that way too?”

That *was* the question wasn’t it? She knew Steve was probably trying desperately not to care. But as for whether he was succeeding or not...

“Steve knows better than to make the same mistake more than once” Nancy paused, considering her words carefully “He likes you, you know?”

“Yeah, yeah I guess facing down a faceless demon-monster together will do that. We’re practically best buds now.”

There was an odd little sense, for all his sarcasm, that it was almost true, could've been true if not for--

If not for me.

The door behind them slammed open, rebounding off the wall, making them both jump. The kids that came barrelling through weren't their grade though, spared them little more than a glance before continuing on.

Still it was a reminder, a reminder that standing here talking to Jonathan Byers wasn't the best move in the world right now if she wanted an easy life.

The thought caused a little swirl of anger. At herself mainly, at the fact she still even *cared* about what any of these assholes thought.

The smudged letters were still there, blurred but still visible under the water that was running down the locker. Really, she ought to go get paper towels, finish the job he'd started but suddenly she was too tired, too angry to bother. Let it stay there.

I don't care.

"I have class, we *both* have class...so just bring me back the sweater when you can okay?"

She walked backwards a few paces, feeling that odd little swell of disappointment that always seemed to accompany her interactions with Jonathan lately. Like there should be something more to say, even when there wasn't.

He stood there, watching her go with a closed unreadable expression on his face.

2. What Difference Does It Make?

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonathan Byers was pretty sure he was as big of a creep as people said he was.

Notes for the Chapter:

Well here's Jonathan's POV and a bit more!

Thanks to Snow for betaing this despite the fact she has only seen approximately one and a half Stranger Things episodes ;) But she is still willing to be my 80's music guru!

*"All men have secrets and here is mine
So let it be known
For we have been through hell and high tide
I think I can rely on you...
And yet you start to recoil
Heavy words are so lightly thrown
But still I'd leap in front of a flying bullet for you"*

(What Difference Does it Make?- The Smiths)

Jonathan Byers was pretty sure he was as big of a creep as people said he was.

Maybe even bigger.

Because when he'd heard a few people whispered about how he slept with Nancy Wheeler the main thing he'd felt was this sick little surge of...pride. Even though it was all lies. Even though it meant people staring at him.

It wasn't as if people didn't usually give him weird looks anyway, at least this time it wasn't really for anything bad. Not really. There had been worse rumours about him over the years, far worse.

And it would die down, of course it would. Sooner rather than later probably given how attached Nancy was to Steve. They both just had to keep their heads down and...avoid each other.

The only reason he had only come into school early at all was because Will had wanted to work on his science project and he'd decided to walk him in, thinking he'd use the extra time to go put his name on the roster to use the dark room after classes.

And when he'd rounded the corner towards the bank of lockers, footsteps echoing ahead of him in the empty corridor, that was all he'd been thinking about. Making sure he got his name up so he could develop some of the new shots he'd taken over the Christmas break. The ones of his mom and Will, the tree, the presents. Nothing ground-breaking, nothing that exactly had any artistic merit but... they meant something nonetheless. His mom would like them if nothing else.

In his distracted state he managed to open his locker and put his books away without even noticing anything wrong.

It was only when he slammed the locker shut again and turned to leave that he saw it.

The words 'Cheating Slut' were written across her locker in harsh defined marker pen strokes, almost jagged in the execution. Bold. Designed to be seen, designed to be spotted by anyone walking past.

It had probably been done by Steve's friends.

The surge of rage that tightened his chest surprised him a little, it wasn't just annoyance or anger, it was actual *rage*. The only time he'd felt it before was...the fight, when Steve had insulted his family. And if the person responsible had been there right then, he wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't have lashed out at them the same way he had then.

At least it's not spray paint, I can get this off, if I'm quick she doesn't have to see--

Before he could even properly think about it he yanked his shirt off over his head and dunked it in the water fountain. He dragged it back to her locker, heavy and sopping, leaving a sloppy trail of water in the hallway behind him. Slapped it against the metal and started scrubbing so hard his hands began to ache, the letters smearing under his efforts but not disappearing entirely.

He was so absorbed in it he hadn't even notice her until she was standing right next to him, calling his name.

His first panicked thought was that somehow she'd think it was him that had written those awful words, that she was going to blame him for this.

"I just... I didn't want you to see..."

The words seemed to trip over themselves on his tongue, like her slightly confused blue eyes had robbed him of his ability to speak properly.

"It's been happening every day. I think I would have to have been blind not to see it."

Every day.

He tried to reply but all he could manage was--

"Oh."

She stared at the smudged mess he'd made and something a little like defeat had flickered across her face for a second. Only a moment but he hated, *hated* to see it there.

He unconsciously clenched his fist around his sodden shirt, causing water to run in freezing little trails down his arm, raising goosebumps. Every day. She'd been coming in to see those nasty accusations every single day and she hadn't said a thing.

Why would she tell you anyway? She has Steve.

It was affecting her though. It was pretty obvious that she hadn't been sleeping well. As she stood opposite him, he could clearly see the big bruise-coloured shadows had sprung up under her eyes, dramatic against her pale skin.

He knew what that was like.

It wasn't like he'd ever been a person who lost sleep over anything before. But since everything that had happened...well, sometimes he would spend half the night just staring at the cracks in his ceiling, running things over in his head. And then sometimes, when it was particularly bad, he'd lie there pretending she was next to him. Not terrified and curled in on herself like she'd been that night but... calm, sleepy. Like...she'd rest her head on his shoulder, listening to his music with him. He wouldn't have the headphones on if she was there of course, the music would fill his room instead.

Maybe she wouldn't even like his music, wouldn't like The Clash... maybe she liked something awful like Bryan Adams. Hell, she probably *would* like something awful, most people in Hawkins hadn't even *heard* of The Clash after-all.

But then they didn't have to listen to music... if she was there, he'd be okay with the silence. With just the sound of their breathing. The sound of her shifting on top of his blankets.

It wouldn't ever happen though, for one thing his house was way too small for his mom not to notice if he had someone in his room. And

there was a strict 'no closed doors with girls' rule in enforcement. In theory anyway. He'd never bought a girl home to test it.

And for another, probably more important reason...Nancy didn't really like him in that way.

He'd thought...like maybe, maybe there had been a *moment*, just a moment when she did. But now she spent her time glued to Steve's side, pretty much avoided him. Well, she would sometimes... look at him. In the hallways, between classes, he'd feel eyes on his back and turn around and...there she'd be. Watching him with an unreadable look in her big blue eyes.

"Here, you're going to freeze."

She had untied the sweater from round her waist, was holding it out to him. He went to take it automatically before drawing his hand sharply back. It might cause more trouble for her, if people realised, and he'd caused her more than enough for one lifetime.

"I can't-- it's yours, I can't--"

"I have a coat, seriously. Take it."

He reached out again tentatively, letting her press the soft, worn material into his hands. Her fingers felt almost burningly hot against his chilled ones and he half-wanted to grab onto them, hold onto them tightly so that some of her warmth transferred to him.

Instead he pulled the sweater over his head, feeling odd as it clung

strangely to his torso. Too narrow on the shoulders and too short at the front. Both too big and too small at the same time. But warm. And it smelt faintly of the sweet, vanillary perfume that she wore.

“Thanks.”

Just for a moment there was an almost tender look on her face. Then, abruptly it faded and once again she was watching him with that serious, tired expression.

He wanted to reach across, touch her somehow. Pull her to him and fold her into his arms, tell her that he would make all this better somehow.

But he couldn't do that.

What he remembered was that even closing his fingertips gently, tentatively over hers had almost felt too much. Like if he let himself touch her even a little bit more right then, the low steady crawl of the electricity that had started to run underneath his skin would rise up, become something he couldn't handle.

“I don't care, you know that right?”

Her voice startled him out his thoughts.

“I don't care what they think...about us” she continued “It doesn't matter.”

Despite what she was saying, the look on her face told a different story. This was messing her up, big time. Maybe...maybe she didn't care but maybe *Steve* did, maybe he was upsetting her over it. Which probably wasn't his business, so he should probably keep out of it. He knew that, he really did but he couldn't help asking.

"Right. Does Steve think that way too?"

There was a flicker of.. *something* on her face that made him think Steve might not be dealing with this whole thing all that well. But it was gone so quickly he couldn't be sure he hadn't imagined it.

"Steve knows better than to make the same mistake more than once. He likes you, you know?"

"Yeah, yeah I guess facing down a faceless demon-monster together will do that. We're practically best buds now."

There was that strange look on her face again... somehow sad but sort-of wryly amused at the same time.

The main doors banged open, slamming into the walls so loudly it almost sounded like a gunshot. People began to spill in, talking loudly, sneakers squeaking against the floor.

Ruining the moment.

He glanced down at his watch, noticing it was almost homeroom time and he'd probably lost his chance to book out the darkroom. But he found he didn't care all that much. It was worth it...to spend some time with her. Even if it was only a little.

Her eyes flickered back toward her locker where the words were now formless smudges. If you squinted you could still see what they said though and he found himself wishing he'd done a better job cleaning it.

"I have class, we both have class...so just bring me back the sweater when you can okay?"

As he watched her leave, the almost irresistible urge came over him to call out after her. To call her back, to prolong the moment somehow. But he had nothing to say, not really. Instead he turned back and opened up his locker again, trying to stuff his wet shirt far enough in the back so it didn't saturate all his books.

He shut it again with more force than necessary, resisting the urge to just pound his fist against it. Get rid of the odd itch of aggression that had started to run through him again.

It wasn't fair.

Well, when was anything? Steve wasn't a bad guy, as badly as he wanted him to be. Nancy clearly liked him alot and why shouldn't she? Why should she just drop everything to date the school loser rather than the rich, handsome, popular guy she'd been with before?

Someone slammed into him, knocking him so hard into his locker that his teeth sank sharply into his lip.

“Sorry Byers! Didn’t see you skulking there!”

Tommy Harrison came to a stop in front of him, grin stretched across his face. His girlfriend (*Carla or Kylie or something? No...Carol*) was hanging onto him as usual, and there were some other people from the class above with them. Jonathan didn't immediately recognise them but one look into the amused, hungry faces forming a loose ring around him showed he probably wasn't going to find much sympathy here.

“Hey Byers, what’s up man!”

The greeting from the biggest one (... *Reed* he thought . *His father owned a garage downtown, so he had usually had one of the best cars of any kid in school. Which was probably why they were palling around with him, it was like his one redeeming feature*) sounded genuine but the ‘friendly’ shoulder pat that accompanied it sent him careening back into the lockers, slamming painfully against the lock.

He stood with his back pressed against the cold metal and watched them warily. Tommy was probably stronger than Steve and definitely meaner. And there was no chance in hell this would be a one on one, fair fight. Oh no, this would be a dog pile. So he probably had Reed and that skinny blonde kid Donnie to contend with as well. Possibly Carol, if he was down on the floor or something she’d probably put a few kicks in, he wouldn’t put it past her. Just because he’d won his last fight didn’t mean he’d win this one.

“You know, Steve’s an idiot but he’s still my friend. And watching you and that slut carrying on behind his back...”

A small mocking smile curled the corners of Tommy's mouth.

"...well it makes me angry Byers. Do you see why?"

He clenched his fists so hard if he hadn't been such a habitual nail biter then they would have dug into his palms. All he could think about were Nancy's big hurt eyes as she looked at her locker. Not even angry, just....tired.

"Don't...don't call her that."

Stupid words, it would've been best not to provoke him. But he couldn't swallow them down, couldn't let them talk about her like that.

"Oh, the truth hurts doesn't it?"

Tommy leant back, hooking his thumbs through his belt loops, no doubt imagining he looked like something out of a Clint Eastwood movie. Showdown at the Hawkins High Corral or something. He was *enjoying* this. And he wasn't the only one. Jonathon could see the rush, the thrill of it painted across their faces.

"See, what I don't understand is what she sees in you in the first place. I mean, sure maybe she's just a desperate whore who will take it wherever she can get it but even then, I mean there's standards Byers."

“ *Stop* it.”

Lightning fast Tommy’s hand flashed out, latching into the front of his borrowed sweater, shoving him back painfully against the locker.

“Or....what Byers? You gonna go crazy on me like you did Steve? Well, come on, come on you little *faggot* .”

Up this close he could see how the freckles on Tommy’s face made him look like someone had splattered him liberally with ink.

“I’m not Steve Harrington, I’m not some weak little girl who’s gonna go down easy. So take a swing, Byers.” His voice was soft but vicious “Go on. Take a swing and let’s see if Nancy likes you so well without any of your teeth.”

“What is going on out here!”

The teacher who had popped his head out his classroom door glared between all of them indiscriminately, as if Jonathan was just as responsible for the disturbance as anyone. Tommy dropped his hold on his collar, smoothing the rumpled fabric back down.

“We were just having a talk, Mr Carter.”

“I see. Well, class has started, so get on going.”

The others began to disperse, wandering off to their classes. But Tommy stood his ground for a long moment before re-shouldering his backpack with a nasty grin.

“See you later Byers.”

He kept his back pressed against the locker until they all disappeared from sight round the corner. Then he straightened his clothes, trying to look less like he'd almost been in a fight. Licked his lip, tasting the coppery blood. He guessed if news of this got round the rumours would have him not only sleeping with Nancy Wheeler but also getting into fights left right and center. Completely unable to control his bloodlust.

Yeah, that was him alright, Jonathan Byers- Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know.

They might try and hang around after school, have another go at him. Well he'd be out of there as soon as the bell rang anyway, high school let out before the middle school but only ten minutes. And sometimes he really had to pelt down the road to be there in time to see Will unlocking his bike, joking around with his friends. He wouldn't go up to him, wouldn't embarrass him like that but he would just...watch. Watch as his brother hauled his skinny frame onto the bike that was just a little too big for him still, pale brown hair falling into his eyes as he lifted himself up on the pedals to get up the speed to keep up with Lucas and Mike. Dustin would be bringing up the rear, moving more sedately, like he really didn't care about being out in front with the others.

If his brother was going over to Mike's house, like he usually did, then Jonathan would trail after them on foot, jogging a little, far enough back that they didn't spot him. Watch until they all bundled into the side door and the light went on. Usually he'd hang around for a bit, just to be sure that his brother wasn't going to change his mind and set out on his own. It wasn't the most comfortable thing when it was still winter, he'd end up stamping his feet to keep warm, breath steaming up the air in front of him, feeling a bit like an idiot but not able to make himself leave. And usually while he was lurking around in the shadows opposite until Steve's car pulled up.

Sometimes he'd feel a stab of resentment toward them, towards both of them. Then he'd realise he was the one watching them from the bushes and feel...well... like a creep. If anyone ever caught him...well it would just add to the never-ending 'Why Jonathan Byers is just SO weird and creepy' list they all seemed to be keeping. Explaining he was actually stalking his brother and not Nancy would probably not exactly make it any better either.

Still it didn't stop the viciously dull hurt that throbbed in his chest when Steve put his arm round her, or when he noticed she was wearing his coat.

So he'd wait there, watch as the pair went inside, then watch the lighted windows of the house until his hands started to go numb and he couldn't control the chattering of his teeth anymore. Then would come the slow, cold walk back up the hill to the school to collect his car or maybe use the darkroom.

Either way, it would be utterly alone.

3. Watching the Detectives

Summary for the Chapter:

Nancy wasn't sure what woke her, only that her eyes snapped open and all of a sudden she was jolted completely awake in the darkness.

Notes for the Chapter:

My lovely lovely Mink betaed this and she is amazing for continuing to do this and provide me with 80's awesomeness

To be honest guys, I got really super disheartened at the lack of response to the last chapter and it kinda knocked all the desire to keep writing it out of me. But I got a bit of it back, so this chapter happened and I really hope you like this one more!

Nice girls, not one with a defect

Cellophane shrink-wrapped, so correct

(Watching the Detectives, Elvis Costello)

Two weeks later and the sweater was still on his chair. Jonathan kept meaning to wash it, dry it and give it back to her. It would be an excuse to see her, talk to her again, after all. But if he did that then he'd have to wash away the lingering trace smells of Nancy that clung to it. The fabric softener, the faintest hint of some sticky sweet perfume.

He picked it up, clenching his fingers in the well-worn softness of the fabric.

It smelt the same way her bed had.

He'd been so cold that night, sleeping on top of the covers. And it had definitely been more awkward than anything he'd felt... like beyond awkward. He'd been so worried about where he put his arms and legs, keeping to his side of the bed, things like that. Things he never had to worry about normally. And Nancy... she'd been so curled in on herself, so *terrified*. If he'd have been someone like Steve Harrington he would have probably gathered her up in his arms and stroked her hair. Let her cry.

Make it *better* somehow.

But all he'd been able to do was stare at the outline of her profile against the bedside light, fiercely wishing he was half as good with soft words and comforting people as he was at photography.

There was a rap on his door and he dropped the sweater almost guiltily.

“Come in.”

His mother pushed the door open, leaning against the door jamb and smiling at him tiredly.

“Hey.”

Her voice was raspy, the way it got when she had been smoking too much or crying too much. It might have been both tonight, by the look at it.

“You okay?”

“Just had a bad night’s sleep.”

He’d heard her crying out, not just last night but several nights since...everything.

Of course the reason he’d been awake was that he’d been having similar dreams himself.

His mom always was the weirdest contradiction ever, both the strongest person he knew and at the same time the most fragile.

“That was your dad on the phone.”

That explained the agitation then. Most of the time he wished that man would just... disappear. Like up and leave them entirely without a trace rather than keeping his hooks in long distance. Dangling little those bits of hope so Will thought he might still care.

“He suggested maybe getting a therapist for Will... he hasn’t been himself since...” she waved her hand around helplessly, as if trying to encompass all the madness that had happened all those months ago.

“Will is *fine*. ”

But that was a self-serving lie and he knew it. Will wasn’t fine, there was something... *off* about him. Not all the time, but sometimes.

Sometimes it looked like he was so scared he could hardly breathe.

“I talked to Karen about it, she’s thinking about sending Mike and Nancy as well. I wanted to send you too but... it’s just so *expensive* ...”

“It’s okay. I don’t need therapy mom.”

Sure he was obsessively stalking his younger brother and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept without a nightmare *and* he was developing some pretty intense feelings for a girl who seemed to feel nothing but vague friendship for him, but all of that was small change compared to everyone else’s problems.

She stared at him a little sadly, chewing on her bottom lip as if she wanted to say more. He dropped his eyes to the bed covers, picking restlessly at a loose thread and lied through his teeth.

"I'm *fine* , mom."

-

Nancy wasn't sure what woke her, only that her eyes snapped open and all of a sudden she was jolted completely awake in the darkness.

Darkness

Her light was off.

It had been on when she drifted off, she was sure of that. *Nothing* would make her sleep in the dark anymore. A deep, deep panic began to well inside her, as she reached out blindly till her trembling fingers found the smooth plastic of the switch.

Pulling in an unsteady breath she flipped it on.

Nothing.

The bulb must have blown, that was the easiest explanation, or the plug had somehow gotten knocked out of the wall. Something ordinary and mundane like that. If it was the plug...well that was easily fixed.

All she had to do was reach down and confirm it.

The thought of putting her hand down into the dark, shadowed space between her headboard and the wall filled her with an immediate sense of horror.

Then get up and put on your main light, you'll be able to see.

I can't, what if I've flipped over? What if I stand up and my feet sink into the decay of that place?

She rolled onto her back, trying to calm her panicked breathing, listening to the grandfather clock in the hall strike a tinny five. There wouldn't be clocks over there, would there? It didn't seem possible.

The wind outside howled, throwing black and silver shadows across the ceiling. In the distance, the deep distance she thought she heard the high wailing of a car alarm.

You're not over there, you're not, you're in your bed now go, go before you lose your nerve!

Her feet hit the floor and she stumbled, her forward momentum still carrying her to the door. Her fingers hit the lightswitch so hard a bolt of pain shot up them and the room was suddenly flooded with bright, harsh light.

Her own, unchanged bedroom.

You're an idiot, you know that.

For a long moment she stood there, cradling her throbbing hand, and let her eyes sweep across the room. Looking for any signs, anything the slightest bit out of place...

But there was nothing

She walked back to her bed and yanked off her lampshade, unscrewing the bulb, feeling the glass still a little warm under her aching fingertips. It hadn't blown long ago. The sudden darkness, the change, must have been what woke her up.

Your light bulb blows and you practically have a meltdown .

It was really no wonder her mother had started going on about wanting her to see a therapist. Her and Mike. To help her 'get over' Barbara's disappearance. To help him deal with the loss of 'his little friend'. Her mother never referred to El by name, it would be....acknowledging the strangeness of it all.

Anyway, she couldn't go a therapist. She just couldn't take another person telling her Barbara's death wasn't her fault. Another person *lying* to her.

Because it was her fault, every single bit of it was her fault. She'd dragged Barb there, to the party when she didn't want to come. Not even because she really wanted her there but because she was afraid the others didn't want *her* there. That they'd ignore her, be mean to her. *Something*.

So she'd forced Barb to go along, as a back-up, a safety net.

And then she'd talked her into doing that stupid trick with the beer can, which was when she'd cut herself. How Barb had drawn that... *thing* to her. Her best friend had sliced deep enough into her hand to draw blood but oh no *Nancy Wheeler* doesn't care about that. All she can think about is how good it's going to feel when Steve Harrington put his hands on her.

How good being bad felt. Not playing it safe. Not being her mother.

And then... finally... she'd told Barb to just go. Hadn't made sure her friend got to her car safely, even though her brother's friend had just disappeared so nearby. She had been a selfish bitch, and she *hated* herself.

Dimly she became aware that tears were rolling down her cheeks, undramatic and silent as she stood there, the blown light bulb leaking its fading warmth into the palm of her hand. Into the scar slashed across the width of it.

Stupid. Like tears would change anything now.

Mentally shaking herself, she forced herself back into the present enough to walk out into their long, wide hallway and toward the stairs. What she needed to do was stop dwelling, change the light bulb and see if she could salvage a few more hours sleep before school started.

She wasn't actually sure what caught her eye as she passed the hall window, maybe just the bright patch of white against the darkness looking somehow out of place in their neighbourhood.

A van, a repair van by the look of it, the light fall of late season snow just starting to accumulate on its windscreen.

What was wrong was that there were dark shadows moving in the front of it, not one but two. The hair began to prick on the back of her neck. The clock in the hallway had struck five, she was sure of that. Just a shade too early for anyone to be starting work.

Burglars, scoping out the house, it had to be who else would be watching them this late...

The engine roared suddenly, startlingly loud in the early morning quiet, headlights flaring disturbingly bright. It set off at a sedate pace, not rushing. As if it's work had simply been finished.

Which it probably had, there had probably been a problem with the power lines or something and they'd started work early rather than have everyone yell at them when they woke up and couldn't watch

Good Morning America while they had their cereal. And she was just being paranoid, just like when her light bulb had blown.

But it still left her with a deep sense of unease for some reason she couldn't quite place, that weighed on her as she crept down the stairs, footsteps muffled by the thick pile of the carpet.

Something moved in the darkness of the lounge.

She fumbled, almost dropping the bulb and letting out a thin little shriek.

"Nancy?"

The lamp clicked on and illuminated her brother staring up at her incredulously from the Lay-z-boy. Mike looked too small in their dad's chair, twig arms resting against the overstuffed sides, legs stretched out in front of him. He looked like, at any moment, the chair might finish the job of swallowing him up, just....pull him in.

Make him disappear.

Eat him.

Oh quit it Nancy, you're being weird and morbid. He's just a small kid in a big chair that's all. Quit it with the paranoia.

She wondered if he'd grow up in the next few years, get taller than her and broad and start growing a beard. It seemed utterly impossible that any of that would happen to the fragile, elfin looking little boy in front of her.

"Can't sleep?" she asked, crossing the space between them. He looked up at her furtively, as if she was going to lay into him about not being in bed.

"No."

She perched on the arm of the chair, feeling it tilt a little under her weight.

"You really miss her huh?"

Her brothers face fell, mouth working like he was struggling to hold it together. Looking just as angry and lost as she felt.

"Mom...she keeps talking about getting me a dog. Like that will make everything okay again, like she's trying to *replace El*."

Nancy winced in sympathy,

"She doesn't really think that... she thinks that she's helping."

“I know. I just wish she’d...stop.”

That was part of the problem with their mom, she supposed. She always meant well, always meant to do the best thing for everyone. But didn’t seem to understand that what she thought was for the best wasn’t always right.

“Yeah.”

Tentatively she put her arm around him, feeling a little guilty when he jumped in surprise. Had they really drifted that far apart?

We’re going to be closer, she promised herself, I’m going to be there for him. If he needs me.

They sat there in silence both watching as the sky lightened outside, too fast and bright to be anything but more snow. A lot more snow by the look of it. Sitting quietly in the semi-darkness, until the telltale creaks and door slams of their parents morning routine began.

Really she should get moving, go drag herself into some clothes and make herself look presentable for school but the thought of it left her exhausted in a way she couldn’t quite describe. Even when their father made his way downstairs, bed-ruffled and clad in his tartan robe and made a passing comment about how they were up early, she couldn’t make herself move.

“Well Mike, that was your school on the phone. Classes are cancelled, because apparently someone stole all the salt, can you believe that? They can’t salt the sidewalk.” Her father sounded incredibly bemused by this turn of events, as if the idea of people stealing salt was beyond his comprehension, and Nancy ducked her head to hide the small smile pulling at the corner of her lips.

“I’ll stay off with Mike, I’m... not feeling too great.” she offered.

He frowned at her but she met the gaze head on, making sure to keep her expression open and guileless. She wasn’t the kind of person who skipped school. Well, she *hadn’t* been the kind of person who skipped school. Maybe she was now, maybe the Nancy who had emerged after this whole thing had more important things to worry about than her attendance record.

“We’ll watch TV. It’ll be good.”

Mike smiled back at her, a little thinly. Their dad stared at them a moment longer before absently nodding, smoothing his bed-head with the hand not clutching his coffee and wandering off back into the kitchen. Which was probably tantamount to consent.

“I mean...if the TV’s still on, there was some repair van outside earlier so maybe the power lines came down.”

Mike’s head whipped up so fast it startled her, his dark eyes huge and scared in his pale face. She lost her seat on the arm of the chair, stumbling to her feet.

“Repair van? What kind of repair van?”

“Jesus Mike, I don’t know! A white one?”

He’d scrambled over to the window, yanking the net curtains up, scanning the neighbourhood with an intensity that was almost frightening.

“Mike, what--”

“You came here, you saw, you said you did! You and Jonathan and the Chief! Don’t you remember all the vans, the *white vans* ?”

The chill ran up her spine like electricity. That had been it, that had been what had disturbed her so much about the sight of the van, she’d all but forgotten about them but still...

“It was just a white van, that doesn’t mean...”

The words sounded hollow, shaky on her lips. Untrue.

“What did it do when you saw it?”

“Drove away, listen, Mike--”

“Drove away because you *spotted them*. ”

The net curtained crumpled in his grip as he fisted his small hands.

“I wish I could make them pay, for what they did to El. It was their fault she... went away. It was their fault she wasn’t allowed to just be normal in the first place.”

It should have been laughable, her brother who looked like he was mostly put together out of taped up broom handles saying he wanted to make anyone pay. But the fierce, drawn look on his face made it... real somehow.

“I know. I know you do.”

With a deep breath he seemed to force himself to drop the curtains, step back but his eyes remained fixed on the window. “I think the van means they’re watching us, and I think it means we have to be very, very careful.”

Their mom had come down and was rattling dishes in the kitchen, everything should have seemed normal but her brother’s words still sent a cold shiver up her spine.

Made her think that maybe things could never be normal again.

4. Bela Lugosi's Dead

Summary for the Chapter:

She wasn't just going to sleepwalk through anymore.

Notes for the Chapter:

Mink is as ever, the world's most awesome beta who serenaded me with 80's hits via FaceTime. Because we're cool.

I really hope you like the chapter and please, please, please leave a comment. Honestly they are like 90% of my drive to update.

Bela Lugosi's dead

The bats have left the bell tower

The victims have been bled

Red velvet lines the black box

(Bela Lugosi's Dead- Bauhaus)

The school year had somehow slipped by, moving from the strangely bitter spring into an oddly sullen and heated early summer. It seemed to Nancy like it was snowing one week and then baking hot the next. She didn't like it, it felt somehow like they'd skipped a whole season, like she'd *lost* a whole season.

Steve had already started talking about junior prom, what color her dress was going to be, if they were going to get a limo because it was just the two of them (the unspoken fact that no one would be willing to double with them...with *her* ... hanging over that sentence), how maybe it was a bit pretentious *just* for the junior prom...

She let it roll off her, not really caring. If he wanted to go, she'd probably go but she couldn't seem to muster the enthusiasm to actually be excited about it. A whole evening trapped with her classmates sounded a little like her own personal version of hell right about now.

The graffiti, the notes, none of that seemed like it was going away anytime soon. But it wasn't getting worse either and she supposed she was grateful for that at least.

The *dreams* were getting worse.

Mostly she couldn't remember them but...somehow she knew they were bad. Not just bad... *horrifying* . In the moments after she woke up, bed drenched in rapidly cooling sweat, a scream sticking in her throat, she could remember a little, flashes. At first they hadn't been every night...once a week, one in three maybe. They were upsetting but she could deal with it, just about. Leave the light on until they faded away, call Steve maybe if the dream was so bad it felt like she'd go crazy if she had to be alone. He hadn't minded, had been sweet about it.

She'd stopped calling him though, a few weeks ago. She wasn't even sure why, just that it felt wrong. It had been months and months, things were supposed to be getting better, easier.

Not worse.

So it had seemed sensible to let Steve reach the natural assumption that she was sleeping better and instead to make excuses for why he couldn't spend the night. She assumed he thought her parents were coming down hard on her or she was worried about school or something. But he was already beginning to get a little annoyed at having cramped, uncomfortable sex in his car although true to form he hadn't pushed her on it. Wouldn't. Because Steve was a Good Guy. The kind of stand up guy who would do everything he could to make his girlfriend more comfortable. The kind of guy who wanted to make everything better somehow.

He'd wanted her to go round tonight, his parents were away at another conference. Get a pizza, rent a movie, fool around on the couch. Normal stuff. But she'd said no, couldn't be there so close to where Barb had been taken....where Barb had *died*.

Instead she was lying on her bed with her schoolwork spread out around her. It was too early to sleep but the prospect of studying was too exhausting, even looking at her biology textbook made her eyelids feel heavy. It seemed easier to lay on her back, stare up at the ceiling and half-listen to the upbeat pop song playing on the radio. Really, she *should* study though. Her grades had begun to slip, not quickly enough to cause alarm in her teachers or parents but sooner or later someone was going to pick up on the downward trajectory of their former 'academic superstar'. Sooner or later someone was going to stop believing her when she said everything was fine.

And then...then they might insist on the therapist.

All she wanted to do was call Barb, to talk to her until she was too tired to form words, like she'd done every night since they were twelve. It always felt like she was forgetting to do something, the habit so deeply ingrained even after all these months that sometimes

she would find herself absently picking up the phone around six, ready to talk. Except there was no one to call now, no one to share secrets with.

No one to confide in.

The tiredness seemed to roll over her in heavy waves, dragging her deeper. Slowly, slowly her eyes drooped and finally slid shut.

When she opens them again she is still in her room, the light is still on but the quality has changed somehow. Like someone has swapped out the comforting golden glow of her lamp for the harsh brightness of a fluorescent bulb which throws jagged shadows into every corner. But even as she turns to look at it, it seems to fade and die, the brightness slowly bleeding out of it until the room is little more than a murky gray.

There's still just enough light for her to see, to notice that parts of the wall seem to be flaking away, the bright white of the plaster cracking and falling in wet clumps to reveal the grey dankness of whatever is really underneath. She can feel the bed clothes damp under her hands, somehow...decayed, as if they'd been left out in the rain to rot. It makes her skin prickle and crawl, like it objects violently to being in contact with it. Distantly she thinks she hears crying, not loud terrified crying but the kind of hopeless, abandoned sound someone makes when they've been crying a long time and know that no one is going to come. Maybe are even scared that someone might. Maybe it is on the TV downstairs, maybe Mike has switched over to a different show or something...but somehow she knows it isn't.

There is something in the bed with her.

*She can **feel** it, shifting sinuously under the sheets next to her. A smooth, slipping motion that reminds her dimly of handling a snake when she was five at the zoo.*

But if she touches it, it won't be dry and warm like the snake...if she reaches down and touches it, it will be damp, slick and slimy beneath her fingertips. It will be poison.

How she knows this she has no idea but it has a persuasive kind of weight to it. She wants to get up, she wants to throw herself off the bed but her body feels like it's too heavy, like she's too tired. Like all she can do is lie here and watch the random specks of what looks like ash floating around over the top of her head and listen to the slow, viscous sound of it moving beneath her covers and feeling the hard thudding of her heart.

*How can I be so tired in a dream? How can everything seem so **real** ?*

She woke suddenly, jolting herself awake. Sweat was drying on the back of her neck, under her arms, rolling down her forehead, making her feel clammy and in desperate need of a shower. The warm golden light of her lamp still lit the room, the radio was still playing, the same programme or the same DJ at least, though the song had just changed to some weird one about how Bela Lugosi was dead. Slowly, slowly she pulled herself into a seated position, feeling her muscles protest violently. She felt chilled, achey, as if she'd been asleep on top of her covers for hours.

Actually her skin didn't even just feel cold, it felt *numb* . Like someone had tossed her in an ice bath before throwing her back in the bed. But the dream was already becoming blurred, getting more safely distant with every passing moment and she was so, so relieved.

If I could remember them properly I'd go mad....

She slipped her hand underneath her pillow, fingers sliding around the handle of the heavy flashlight she'd taken to keeping there. Just in case.

Part of her wished it was a gun.

When Jonathan had slept over, she remembered staring at the dull shine of the gun barrel that poked out from under the folds of her comforter. Barely resisting the urge to delicately pull it out and tuck it under her pillow. But she'd been afraid to wake him, she wasn't sure how he could even sleep in the first place but she hadn't wanted to wake him.

So yeah, she was pretty sure if she'd had a gun she would have slept with it here.

But what good would it really do? It had barely annoyed that...thing when she'd emptied bullet after bullet into its side.

Nothing had.

Even when they'd trapped it, set it alight. Done everything they could do to it.

It hadn't died.

She slipped out of bed and eased open her door, padding quietly down the hallway. Stopping just short of the netted curtain at the end. Downstairs she could hear Mike's surprised bray of laughter at something on the TV and at the end of the hall she could hear her mother singing a soft lullaby to Holly as she got her ready for bed.

Taking a deep breath Nancy stepped forward and twitched the curtain aside.

The white van was here again, bright against the shadowy sidewalk opposite.

Most nights it was. Not all, there had been three weeks in March where she hadn't seen any signs of it. Long enough for her to start wondering if she was imagining the whole thing, if Mike's paranoia was rubbing off on her but...

They'd come back and soon she'd begun to notice them around town as well, always coincidentally wherever she was. Or parked opposite Mike's school.

Like they were...waiting for something to happen. Ready to swoop in like vultures the minute it did.

The crazy urge came to her to fling the window open, to scream at them to leave her, to leave *Mike* alone. To go away because it was

over, it was *over*.

Instead what she did was step forward until her nose was practically pressed against the glass and stare down at the shapes moving around behind the windscreen. Raised her fist and rapped-- *once, twice* -- on the cool glass.

She wasn't sure if they could hear her but maybe the motion caught their eye or something because the distant pale blur of the faces turned so they were looking up at her. It was strange but...she wasn't scared anymore. Instead, she was angry. More than angry, *furious* .

Slow, very deliberately she curved her right hand around and gave them the finger.

"Go to hell." she murmured under her breath as the dull roar of the engine started up, feeling the anger swirl around in her chest, welcoming it, bright and pure and somehow burning away the cobwebs, the *complacency* of the last few months.

She wasn't just going to sleepwalk through anymore.

Firstly, she was going to find out why the hell those vans were still following them. And the best place to start would probably be that place... the *facility* ... in the woods that Mike and his friends had talked about. The one Eleven had come from. If the white vans were still about then the facility had to still be open. Maybe even still experimenting.

Steve would go with her if she asked but he'd be full of questions. Start to get concerned. He'd want to know *why* , probably wouldn't think her growing sense of paranoia was a good enough reason. He might have been part of everything that had happened but... he'd come in at the end and that made all the difference somehow.

Mike would go with her, no questions asked. She wasn't entirely sure he wasn't planning something similar himself but... he was her little brother. What she really wanted was to keep him as far away from harm as she could.

Jonathan would understand. She wasn't sure why she was so sure of that but... she was.

Except she wasn't really sure she could just ask him out of the blue. Even though it had only been a few months really, it felt like decades, eons had passed since everything had happened and still neither her nor Jonathan had found a way to bridge this stupid awkward divide that had sprung up between them.

Nancy, at her core, was deeply practical. If one of them needed to make the first move then she could do it.

Back in her room she turned the radio down until it was just a murmur of noise and picked up the pale blue handset of her phone. Having her own line had its advantages, she remembered when her parents had it installed amid murmurs of 'well she's growing up' and 'giving her responsibility is a good step' when what they really meant was 'get Nancy her own line so we stop missing all our calls on the main one'. But they never would have said that, it would have made it seem too much like they were rewarding bad behaviour she guessed.

The number she'd looked at so often in her mom's address book that she could punch it in from memory.

"Hello?"

When his mom answered she almost hung up, almost flung the phone down like she was doing something wrong. Her palm felt sweaty against the plastic of the handset. She tucked the phone into the crook of her neck, wiping her hand against her jeans. Her heart was beating stupidly hard as well, she could feel it thumping fast in her chest, her neck, her hands.

Get a grip Nancy.

"Is...is Jonathan there?"

In the background she could hear the blare of the TV, canned laughter, probably the same show Mike was glued to downstairs right now.

"Sure, sure he's in his room. Who's calling?"

"Oh...it's Nancy... Nancy Wheeler."

"Nancy! Hi, how's your mom?"

“She’s good.” she answered, praying desperately she wasn’t going to have to go into a blow-by-blow of how her family was doing.

Jonathan’s mom must have sensed it because there was a trace of amusement in her voice as she answered. “Oh right, I’ll just go grab Jonathan for you...”

There was a clack as she put the phone down somewhere and then the sound of her yelling his name, muffled conversation and then the sound of him fumbling as he picked up the headset.

“Hey, Nancy... just...just a minute.” His voice sounded weirdly thin and nervous but that might just have been the line. There was some muffled cursing and then the click of the door. “Okay, we can...we can talk now.”

There was a strange echo, as if he’d stepped into a much bigger space or something.

“Your voice sounds weird, where are you?”

“Uh... the bathroom,” he said, sounding uncomfortable “it’s the only place the cord will reach that’s private.”

It almost made her laugh, the idea of him locking himself in the bathroom to talk to her. Like they were going to be discussing illicit,

private things. That would probably give his mom a whole lot to speculate about at least.

His exhale was so loud, magnified by the phone, that it made her jump a little. It was like he was breathing directly in her ear “So, uh, how are you?”

All the things she wanted to say to him were crowding up her throat, demanding to be heard but all that came out was-- “Fine. I’m...fine.”

“That’s good.” His voice was tinged with disbelief, like he knew the truth but didn’t want to come straight out and say it.

“...you know that’s a lie, don’t you.”

“Yeah, yeah I was pretty sure it was.”

She could hear him shifting around and imagined him sitting on the tiles, back against the door, sitting there in the dark with his legs crooked up in front of him. Why in the dark she didn’t know but it felt somehow *right*, the image of him lit only from the moonlight coming in through the small bathroom window.

For some reason it drove her to reach across, flick the switch on her own lamp. Plunge herself into darkness. Her heart gave a little stutter, fear tightening in her stomach but then it seemed to let go, to ease off. For once it felt... normal, like she was just lying in her bedroom in the darkness. Not like something was waiting in the

shadows for her to let her guard down. With the sound of Jonathan's breathing in her ear, the distant sound of the TV from downstairs and the light creeping in under her closed bedroom door for once the darkness felt *safe* .

"I'm not sleeping well."

It was as much as she could bring herself say on the phone. Over a line where anyone could hear. It sucked because all she wanted to do was tell him everything, about the little snatches of the dreams she remembered, about the white vans, ask if he'd noticed anything. Because if they were following him too, he'd notice she was sure of it.

Jonathan was the type of person who noticed details.

"Well, that's understandable..." His voice was soft but there was no hint of the syrupy-sweet sympathy most people liked to dish out.

Thank God.

There was another long and awkward pause, she could practically *hear* him shifting through things to say in his head. It made her kinda sad, after their first couple of conversations they'd never seemed to have any trouble talking to each other but now everything was just... *awkward* . She wondered suddenly if *he* was sleeping. He looked tired at school but then he always had done, he was the type of person with permanent clefts carved out under his eyes even if he slept a full eight hours.

“Look, can I see you?” she asked suddenly “I really need to talk to someone who...understands you know?”

Part of her expected him to point out that they *were* talking. For him to play it off like a joke. But when he replied his voice sounded serious, almost... *relieved* .

“Yeah, yeah I think... I mean, I get that.”

If she could talk to him in person she was pretty sure she could convince him to go with her. And if she talked him to in person it might also... make things better somehow.

“So... tomorrow? After school?”

“I’m working tomorrow, maybe we could afterwards?”

“You still work at the gas station right?”

She’d seen him there once or twice, through the window while her mom filled up the minivan. Looking uncomfortable in his polyester blue shirt, making change and pumping gas for people, only remembering to smile at really random intervals.

“Yeah.”

"I'll come by, I mean if that would be okay. Not if it will get you in trouble or anything."

"No, yeah, that would be great."

And it sounded like he meant it. Like her randomly turning up at his work would be one of the best things to ever happen to him. The thought was a little bizarre.

There was a long, considered pause then he asked haltingly,

"Are things at school...still bad?"

"A little better."

His silence spoke volumes and she felt an odd, hot flush crawl across her skin at how easily he could read her, her heart speeding up for no real reason.

"Okay, it's not better at all," she admitted finally, grudgingly "But there's not a lot I can do about it, they'll find someone new to torment eventually. Short attentions spans, you know?"

"Okay." His voice caught a little, making the word strangely choked. He didn't believe her again and it was strange how much of a relief that was. After months and months of people taking her 'I'm fine's' at face value it was weirdly wonderful to have someone see the truth.

There was a light rapping sound from his end and a tentative voice called out,

“Jonathan? I need use the bathroom.”

“Oh, jeez--” she heard the rustling as he transferred the phone from hand to hand and raised his voice “Uh, one minute Will!”

“It’s okay, I have to go now anyway. Homework, you know?”

It was a lie, perhaps the biggest one she’d told this entire conversation. She wondered if he knew it, if he could hear the reluctance in her voice. If he knew that what she really wanted was to tell him not to go, to have him sit with her on the phone until she fell asleep or he did. To listen to the sound of him breathing like it was some kind of lullaby.

Which, honestly, was kinda creepy. So she really, really hoped he *didn’t* know.

“Yeah, I do. Well... see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah...yeah I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She sat there with the phone pressed hard against her ear, listening to

the click as he hung up and then the droning buzz of the open line. Wanting to hold onto the connection for just a little longer becauseeven though it had probably been one of the most awkward conversations in history, for some reason for the first time in a long time she didn't feel quite so deeply alone.

5. Too Close for Comfort

*Hot summer streets
And the pavements are burning
I sit around
Trying to smile but
The air is so heavy and dry
Strange voices are saying
(What did they say)
Things I can't understand
It's too close for comfort
This heat has got
Right out of hand*

(Cruel Summer- Bananarama)

Nancy set off as soon as she got back from school.

The streets were pretty empty now that all the kids had disappeared off home, it seemed like nearly everyone was hiding from the heat indoors. There were cars on the bigger roads, she could distantly hear them roaring back and forth but on the dust track out to the gas station it seemed almost creepily still.

And it was *hot* ... too hot really to walk all the way up there, the bright sunshine already felt like it was hammering down on her head. Her mom would probably have a fit about her not taking a hat. She'd already done her best at intercepting her as she'd walked out the door, pressing her on '*who she was going to be with, where she was going, did she want a lift...*'

Nancy had tripped over her words, saying something about Steve and the movies and fled out the door. Which meant if he called while she was out then... well then she was probably in trouble. But he'd most likely be at the game tonight, so it was a small risk and worth it to get her mother off her back.

She walked without thinking much really. Just staring down at the marks her sneakers scuffed in the dust on the road, the way their fakely cheerful blue was gradually staining a heavy yellow-brown from it. Her head was pounding heavily and her mouth was cardboard dry.

Maybe she'd buy a soda or something while she was up there, it would be an excuse at least.

And it *felt* like she needed one. Even if she'd asked if she could go up there and see him, it still felt like it would be... weird.

It didn't take her too long to walk up there, the grimy box of a building appearing over the crest of the hill all too quickly. Trash littered, yellow grass framed it like hair on a balding man's head. All in all a pretty depressing place to spend your after-school hours.

Somewhere a few miles away Steve would probably be sitting alone in the stands... because she'd *left* him to go alone. In her defense she hadn't even remembered that he'd wanted to go to the game until he'd brought it up at lunch but... she'd left him to face their former friends. Maybe some of them might even try to sit near him, try make amends or something but he'd turn them away. Of course he would, because Steve was a *good guy* and until they accepted her then he wouldn't accept them.

But what if he didn't? The small, nasty voice in her head chimed in What if he weakens without you there? Sits with them 'just for old times sake' after all his nag of a girlfriend isn't there with him. There's no reason for him to sit alone, to be ostracised. People still like him and Steve... well... he likes to be liked doesn't he?

And could she really blame him if he did? After all she'd blown him off to walk up here under the blazing sun to watch Jonathan Byers pump gas for locals in broken down cars.

Before she could talk herself out of it she sucked in a deep breath and pushed open the door. The bell above it jangled, announcing her entrance.

Jonathan froze in the act of opening the cash register, eyes wide with surprise.

He hadn't really thought she was coming .

For the first time in... what seemed like forever she found herself looking at Jonathan Byers. *Really* looking at him, not just catching glances of him around corners and in the back of classrooms. He wasn't as handsome as her brain had made him in her memories. Not even the arrogant, boyish kind of handsome Steve had, the kind of that would probably fade by the time he hit twenty.

It was weird that her brain had done that, somehow made her forget these things. Smooth away the lines carved under his eyes, the puffy

circles that had taken up permanent residence there which looked even more bruise-coloured than normal. Jonathan Byers was *haggard*, angry and tired looking with eyes so dark they looked like holes cut into his face and a wide, sullen mouth that always looked somehow both weary and frightened. He was the prototypical discontented teen, writ large with acne marked cheeks and heavy brows.

He *wasn't* handsome.

So *why* did it feel so much like a lie when she thought that?

Suddenly she was acutely aware of just how much a mess she must look, with her heat frizzed hair, the dark spreading sweat stains on her white top and the dust that was coating her skin. It took everything she had not to reach up and try and fix things. Instead she made herself smile and take a step toward him,

“Hey.”

His voice was soft, a little shaky when he replied.

“Hey.”

The customer, a dour face man wearing a bulky hunting jacket even in this weather, shot her a look and then turned back to Jonathan with a *hrmpf*

“You gonna stand there making eyes all day boy or you gonna give me my change?”

He looked absolutely mortified, fumbling the change into the guy's hand with shaky fingers. The customer passed her by with a mumbled comment she didn't quite catch but she would put money on the fact it wasn't complimentary. The door slamming shut behind him with an air of finality, leaving the two of them completely alone.

It swept over her all of a sudden how much she had *missed* him. Which was kinda dumb because in the first place, well...they hadn't been friends for very long. But she supposed that kind of really super intense friendship that happened when you thought you might die together... well... maybe it was understandable.

And she *had* missed him.

It was hot in here, hotter even than outside... just short of stifling really and Jonathan was sweating too. The old-fashioned fan on the ceiling was stirring his hair, making small wisps of it dance but it wasn't doing a good job of making it any cooler. All it seemed to be doing was moving the warm air sluggishly around and she could see the little beads of sweat standing out on his forehead.

“You want some water? Or a soda?”

He gestured behind him, to the small employees only area off the back of the register. Her throat was dry enough she could hear the *click* when she swallowed.

“Water would be great.”

The little employee area was cramped, barely enough room for the overflowing desk and a small, much stained sink. He probably hadn't expected her to follow him in, she felt a brief stab of embarrassment for doing so. It had been sort of automatic, like she hadn't wanted to let him out of her sight. For a second they stared at each other in crowded, awkward silence.

“Customers aren't really supposed to come back here, sorry.”

“Oh. Right, *right* ...sorry.”

She took a half-step back to lean on the door jamb, folding her arms self-consciously.

It was such a bleak room. There was a fly trapped between the window and the screen that was buzzing out it's annoyance, making her hair stand on edge. And it smelt overpoweringly of cheap pine air freshener, three little tree shaped ones hanging from a hook by the window. Two were sun bleached and old looking but the third was a cheerful, vibrant green and evidently doing most of the work in the scent department.

Nancy didn't really like it, it was kinda gross and reminded her of the bathrooms at school. Plus it made her wonder what kind of smells they were trying to cover up in here.

The pipes creaked and groaned as Jonathan turned the faucet on, chugging out their displeasure before finally spitting out a stream of water into the glass he was holding. When he held it out to her she couldn't help noticing the glass didn't seem to have been cleaned very well, there were smudgy fingerprints on the side.

Still, the water looked clear enough to drink and she was too thirsty to be very picky.

Perching on the countertop, she sipped it without much enthusiasm. It was lukewarm and not exactly pleasant but she made herself drink it anyway. Fainting dead away on the gas station floor was not the kind of impression she wanted to make here. At the very least it got the taste of dust out of her mouth.

"How's Will?"

"He's... good. Doing okay."

It didn't feel like the whole truth but she didn't want to push him on it. Really, after her long radio-silence, she didn't have any right to push him on *anything* .

"That's good."

He stared down at the cash register as if he was expecting it to start

doing something interesting, then snuck a quick sideways glance at her.

“What time do you finish?” Nancy asked him, more to fill the silence than anything.

“Oh. Uh, I’m here till six, working till six.”

About an hour, way before dark even for the early summer.

“Can you give me a lift home?”

“Yeah, sure. I mean, yeah.”

She sat on the counter in silence, swinging her leg out so it intersected with the dusty bar of sunlight. Watching as Jonathan rang up the sparse customers, occasionally disappearing out to the pumps to help people.

It felt...safe.

It was strange but in the dusty golden light of this stuffy little gas station it kind of felt like nothing could hurt her. It was the same as the way she’d felt when they’d spoken on the phone... like everything was right for once. And it was nice to just sit here, a hand's width away from him

She let herself teeter a bit too close to the edge of the counter, wondering if he would take the implicit invitation. Close the tiny amount of space between them.

“Careful.” He brought his hand up to her arm, gently easing her back from the edge. His voice always seemed shaky, always on the verge of breaking, so maybe she was imagining the extra tremor in it now.

His touch was still tentative, as light as he could make it but it meant he was closer to her now, close enough that she could smell him. Could even tell that under the hint of sweat and the sharp layer of gas station, he smelt like the outdoors, probably from where his mother dried his clothes on a long line outside. No chemical fabric softener, no dryer spun clothes.

And... it wasn't even like he was tall. But he was broad through the shoulders, rangy muscle stringing his forearms and she liked that. It made him look... strong. She *knew* he was stronger than Steve, when they'd fought, once he'd gotten angry he'd taken him down so fast it had almost looked easy.

A shiver speared through her, deep in her gut. A little electric, a little sweet and nothing like friendship.

Jesus Christ, she needed to stop comparing them. Like they were dating show contestants or something. Steve was her boyfriend... and he was a great boyfriend. A fantastic one even. And she needed to stop being a lousy girlfriend to him, and step one of that was to stop checking out Jonathan Byers.

The bell above the door jangled, causing him to drop his arm abruptly.

It was Nicole, one of the hangers-on. The one who'd run to Steve, Tommy and Carol to tell them about Jonathan's photograph. She always seemed to be... there. On the edge of things, if not part of the group. The optional member, something a lot of friendship groups seemed to have.

"Hi, *Nancy* . Hey, *Jonathan* ."

His hair hung forward, partially obscuring his face as if he wanted to hide behind it, to disappear. Shoulders hunching in on himself like he was already cringing away from the accusations. She felt the urge to do something similar herself but instead she straightened her back, meeting the other girl's eyes.

But really what was she even going to say? That she'd seen them hanging out at the gas station? There were a million reasons she could be here.

The little thread of guilt that was worming its way into her stomach was ruthlessly stamped on.

"Well...don't you two look cosy?"

Suddenly she was completely, utterly sure of who was writing on her locker every morning.

And why.

“Hey.”

Nicole half-turned, red hair catching in the light and for a sickening moment it reminded her of Barb's.

“You can keep on with the whole locker thing if you want but it won't change anything. Steve doesn't like you, he probably wouldn't like you even if I didn't exist.”

The well of fury and... *shame* in the other girl's eyes let her know she hit the mark pretty dead on.

“Everyone knows you two are screwing around behind his back. Maybe some of us just want the world to know what kind of girl you really are under that ‘goody two shoes’ exterior Nancy Wheeler.”

Her voice was dripping with sickly sweet venom but Nancy found that none of it really seemed to reach her. Instead she just watched as the other girl yanked open the door, jangling the bell and stormed off over the forecourt to the old, somewhat rusty car she'd driven in.

Just a little bit too poor, not *quite* pretty enough. Always on the edge,

wanting to get in. It would have been easy to have sympathy for the other girl if she hadn't spent every morning scrubbing her locker till her arms ached thanks to her.

"How did you know?" Jonathan asked quietly.

"It was a guess, it just....made sense."

For a second she felt the urge to tell him... tell him *everything* . About how bad the graffiti had really gotten, about the vans, about the hollows under Mike's eyes, about the *dreams* . She had a sense that Jonathan might listen to her about them, in a way that Steve wouldn't or *couldn't* .

He stood there, shuffling his battered sneakers and watching her warily from beneath his fallen strands of hair. Strangely, it was the look of concern in his eyes that stopped her from spilling everything. Yeah, Jonathan would listen but really what would it do other than to make him worried as well?

"Don't...don't worry about that okay?" She smiled, trying to lighten the mood again.

"Okay."

But he sounded troubled just the same. For a second she found herself remembering when she found him trying to scrub the graffiti off her locker, face set and angry on her behalf.

Do you ever get angry for yourself Jonathan? Not for like... me or your mom or Will, but for you?

It would've been too weird to ask.

"Look, could you do something for me?" she asked instead.

"Yeah, of course."

"I want to go see what they're doing out there, at that government place."

"What?"

"I just keep thinking...what if they let something else out? Something even worse?"

"But--what can we do if we find out they are? I mean, they're the government. We can't make them stop."

"But we'll know. And we can be prepared. That's enough."

It would have to be enough.

“Yeah.” he agreed quietly after a moment. “So... when do you want to go up there?”

“Tonight.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I update slowly but surely... because I fail at life.

Thanks again to Mink for being a wonderful, wonderful beta and basically prodding me until this chapter was complete.